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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT TORRIJOS CHANGES CABINET

REF: PANAMA 1044

1. (SBU) President Torrijos nominated June 29 three new vice ministers to his cabinet. The newly named vice minister for Government and Justice is current ministry advisor Severino Mejia. Current vice minister for Social Development Doris Zapata is the new nominee for vice minister of Housing. Taking over as vice minister for Social Development is Felipe Cano, currently the director for local government. Further changes may be announced in coming days.

2. (SBU) The latest cabinet changes was the third round of personnel changes in two years for the Torrijos administration, coming two months after the April 2006 reshuffle (see reftel). The changes came as no big surprise, as several Embassy contacts had mentioned these names as possible Cabinet additions.

3. (SBU) The cabinet changes are not expected to have much impact on the future direction of the GOP. Rather, the changes appear to be aimed at pleasing hard-line members of the PRD. Mejia, former aide-de-camp to Manuel Noriega, has developed good working relations with several law enforcement members of our Embassy. We are hopeful that Mejia will help solidify our relationship with this ministry. Zapata is a close ally of Housing Minister and deputy PRD secretary general Balbina Herrera. Cano is a PRD old-timer from Colon, whose nomination is a possible attempt to appease those outside Panama City.

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